



European journal of American studies Reviews 2009

P. Mackay on *Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States*, ed. by A. Balasopoulos et al.



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7514>
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

« P. Mackay on *Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States*, ed. by A. Balasopoulos et al. », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2009, document 3, Online since 25 February 2009, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7514>

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.

Creative Commons License

P. Mackay on Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States, ed. by A. Balasopoulos et al.

- 1 *Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States. European Views of the United States. Vol. 1.* Eds. Antonis Balasopoulos, Gesa Mackenthun and Theodora Tsimpouki. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2008. pp. 330. ISBN 978-3-8253-5479-4.
- 2 This volume comes out of the 2006 EAAS Conference hosted by the University of Cyprus. The book explores expressions of conformism, non-conformism, and anti-conformism in American culture from the nineteenth century to the present. Antonis Balasopoulos' useful Introduction explicates the philosophical, social, and historical complexity of conformity and its alternatives. It argues that Benjamin's anarcho-socialist and conservative politician (or, as he puts it, "the idealist and the hypocrite, if we were to resort to conventionally moralizing terms" (1-2)) might be mirror images of each other endlessly locked in a self-serving dialogue. Balasopoulos rightly suggests that our interest lies in the many ways in which we can read these dialogues between conformity and its others. We might consider reading them through the prism of dialectical negation (conformity invites dissent and vice-versa), through deconstructive demystification (conformism, non-conformism, and anti-conformism as artefacts collapsing into each other), or through meta-historical critique (historical context frames these concepts as well as our interpretation of them).
- 3 All three approaches are present in the volume with more emphasis on the latter. As the Introduction indicates, historical turns (the Puritan settlement of New England, the American Revolution, or the countercultural revolutions of the 1960s) drive our understanding of conformity and its alternatives. From a European perspective these turns signal shifts in American modernity, which directly lead to changes in the way in which Europe imagines and interrogates America.

- 4 Many of these historical turns are mapped in this volume. The opening piece of the book is Donald E. Pease's latest work on American exceptionalism. After offering a concise critical genealogy of American exceptionalism, taking in its disparate guises ("Manifest Destiny," "Leader of the Free World," etc.), Pease asks: can American Studies exist after American exceptionalism? This is a question that is of contemporary relevance to the European scholar, as American studies departments in Europe are closing down due to low interest. One might argue, as Daniel T. Rodgers has indirectly done, that American Studies can and should be practiced without resorting to American exceptionalism (Pease summarises and responds to this argument 33-7). Pease goes on to propose a viable alternative: international American Studies should be grounded in a comparative analysis of imperial state exceptionalisms. Such work, which would focus on historical analysis, would in the words of Pease "bring back into visibility the wars and the laws through which disparate European empires contested with the emergent American imperial state over control of the New World" (41-2). It would bring into sharp relief the ongoing significance of transatlantic and international dialogue, as indeed does the collection under review.
- 5 The essays that follow are, in the main, of very good value. Heinz Ickstadt's piece on conformism and non-conformism as categories of literary criticism is an excellent overview of some of the most significant subversive American literature, ranging from Melville's iconic *Bartleby* who resists what might be called the conformist master text of normative culture to the Language poets of late American modernity who, like William Carlos Williams before them, use language as a field of action. Several essays make good use of Emerson's conceptions of culture, resistance, scholarship, and self-reliance (see Marek Wilczyński; and Johannes Völz), while others dip into contemporary textualities. Of this latter category, my personal favourite is Thomas Pughe's "Ambiguous Beasts: Human-Animal Relations and Poetic Representation," an engaging piece on the non-anthropocentric (and hence anti-conformist) value of poems about animals, and their potential to challenge not only human subjectivity but also poetic discourse. For those readers whose interests reach beyond the literary, the volume offers essays on visual culture, including photography and film. The volume ends with two pieces on contemporary culture (Berndt Ostendorf on advertising's conformist and non-conformist strategies; and Art Redding on digital innovation), which illuminate the continuous and perhaps growing relevance of the conformist, non-conformist, and anti-conformist triptych to contemporary experience.
- 6 *Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States* furthers American Studies in Europe by revisiting the questions that have always concerned the world's relation to America: How does America treat order and anarchy, law and outlaw, democracy and despotism, and what does our own negotiation of these discourses tell us about ourselves? As Balasopoulos perceptively observes in the Introduction, "It is by opening itself to the mind-renewing impact of such energies, after all, that the relational project of European American Studies enacts its own impossible possibility, its own double commitment to distance-annihilating and distance-instituting work" (5).
- Polina Mackay (University of Nicosia)

APPENDIXES